PATTERNS OF POWER

The Altar They Could Not Empty

✦

The War on Religion as the Vanguard Premise Turned on the Seam — That the Militant Atheist Is the Purest Vanguardist, Because He Attacks Not One Robe but the Loom, Believing Religion a Fraud the Priests Laid Over the People That Reason Might Strip Away to Free the Rational Man Beneath; and That the Attempt Fails Twice Over, in France and Russia and Everywhere It Was Tried, Because There Is No Rational Man Beneath the Believer to Free and the Machinery That Made Him a Believer Cannot Be Switched Off, Only Pointed Elsewhere — So the State That Razes the Church Is Compelled to Become One, and the Altar It Empties Refills, With the Old God or a New; Held as Tested, Not Revealed

THOMAS J. BRYAN

Preface

This is the companion to *The Man Underneath*, and it takes that paper's single argument and turns it on the one institution the vanguard was surest it could destroy for the people's good: religion itself. *The Man Underneath* argued that beneath a person's formation — the values he weighs by, the community he turns to, the field of what he can even see — there is no truer self waiting to be freed, because formation is not a costume worn over a self but the self, all the way down; and that the vanguard which razes a people's interpreters and institutions to liberate the worker beneath frees no one, but bereaves a man of the world he lived by and seizes for itself the place from which his beliefs are kept. That paper made the case through the Soviet war on Jewish communal life. This one makes it through the war on religion as such — the recurring modern project, launched first in revolutionary France and carried by the same lineage into Russia, Mexico, Spain, Albania, Mongolia, Cambodia, and China, to abolish religion in the name of freeing the people from it.

The argument is exact and it can be stated at the outset. The militant atheist is the purest instance of the vanguardist, because he does not merely attack a particular creed that serves a particular order; he attacks the whole apparatus of belief, on the theory that religion is a fraud — a thing the priests, in league with the kings, laid over the people to keep them docile — and that reason, applied with sufficient force, can peel the fraud away and let the free, rational human being stand up underneath. This is the doctrine of false consciousness before Karl Marx gave it a name, and it fails for the two reasons the whole of this project has been assembling. The first is the one *The Man Underneath* established: there is no rational man beneath the believer, because the faith is not a veil over him but a load-bearing part of him — his community, his consolation, the frame through which a hard life

is borne — so that razing it does not liberate but bereaves, which is why the assault provokes, everywhere, the same furious defence by the very people it was meant to free. The second is the one this paper adds, and it is the deeper of the two: the machinery that made the person a believer in the first place — the human disposition to defer to marked authority, to belong to a group, to hold certain things sacred and beyond calculation, to organise the world through story — does not switch off when the churches close. It runs anyway, on whatever inputs are to hand. And so the officially atheist state, having emptied the altar, finds the altar refilling — sometimes with the old faith driven underground and revived the moment the pressure lifts, and sometimes with a new cult the state itself is compelled to build, complete with its relics and its saints, its calendar and its catechism, its heresies and its inquisitions. The war on religion does not free people from managed belief. It cannot, because managed belief is not an accident of history that the right revolution could abolish; it is what a large society does with the mind it has. The most the war achieves is to change *which* belief, and to change it, almost always, for a worse one: unchecked where the old was plural, held by force where the old had grown cheap, and murderous in the changing.

Two disciplines must be stated before the cases, because without them the argument would collapse into the thing it is not. The first is that this paper does not adjudicate whether any religion is true. It brackets that question entirely, as the whole method does, and asks only how belief *functions* and what the attempt to abolish it *produced*. Nothing here is a defence of any creed's claims about God or the soul; it is an account of a policy and its results. The second is that the revolutionaries were very often *right* about the thing they were attacking. The Church of the French Ancien Régime, the Orthodox Church of the Tsars, the Buddhist establishment of feudal Mongolia — these were, in the framework's own terms, frequently robes over floors of force, instruments through which an old ruling order had sanctified itself and extracted from those it governed. The vanguard's error

was not in seeing the church as a robe; on that it saw clearly. The error was in believing that you could strip the robe and find a free man under it, when the robe went all the way down and the loom that wove it was in the human mind and not in the priest's hands. The horror the cases record is held here with its full weight and made legible, never excused; to understand a terrible logic is to see where it must be stopped. It is offered, like the method it applies, as tested, not revealed.

A Note on Sources and Collaboration

The framework — the floor of force and the robe laid over it, formation, the two dials of benefit and cost, the seam through which a people's beliefs are kept, the field of the visible, the machine that runs itself, and the permanent cognitive vulnerability the project calls the exploit — is thomas J. Bryan's, developed across the collaboration and set out in the project's foundational papers. The divergence carried here, that the war on religion is the vanguard premise applied to the seam and fails for the reasons *The Man Underneath* names, is his. The research, verification, structure, and composition are Claude's.

The period sources are public and are quoted exactly, at the length the argument needs: the French revolutionary decrees and the words of their authors; Voltaire, Meslier, Marx, and Lenin. Where a source is a modern translation of a mid-twentieth-century statement — Enver Hoxha's speeches, the words of the Khmer Rouge — it is quoted only briefly and otherwise paraphrased. Modern scholarship is paraphrased and credited. The load-bearing figures — the clergy killed, the churches closed, the census the Soviet state suppressed — are drawn from the standard historical and encyclopaedic record and are given with the ranges the record actually

supports, because in several of these cases the true numbers are contested and the honest thing is to say so. A thematic bibliography closes the paper.

The Argument in Eight Parts and a Coda

1 — The Premise, Named. The war on religion rests on the imposture theory: that religion is a lie invented by priests, in league with kings, to enslave the many. The Enlightenment gave it its sharpest form, and even its authors flinched from its conclusion — Voltaire, who cried *écrasez l'infâme*, wanted his tailor to keep believing.

2 — Wither or Smash. The genealogy forks. Marx held that religion is a symptom, the sigh of the oppressed, which would fade when its causes were removed; Lenin sharpened it into a call to combat. The failure indicts the impatient, assaulting wing hardest — and the patient, withering wing quietly concedes the framework's point.

3 — France. The first attempt, and the recoil written into its own history: dechristianisation, the Cult of Reason, then Robespierre's recoil into the Cult of the Supreme Being — the Revolution rebuilding an altar because it could not govern without one — then the Vendée, and the Concordat that made peace with the Church a decade later.

4 — Russia. The most sustained attempt in history: the League of the Militant Godless, the dynamited cathedral, the five-year plan for atheism — and the refutations the record itself holds: the suppressed

1937 census, the wartime rehiring of the Church, the revival the moment the lid came off.

5 — The State That Became a Church. Because the machinery cannot be switched off, the atheist state grew a full liturgy: the embalmed founder, the saints, the calendar, the catechism, the show trial as inquisition. This is not a quip; it is the framework's prediction.

6 — The Same Shape Everywhere. Mexico's Cristeros, Spain's Red Terror, Hoxha's Albania, Mongolia's monasteries, Cambodia's Year Zero, China's Four Olds — the same premise, the same recoil, the same revival, explained by position logic at scale.

7 — Why It Could Not Work. The diagnosis, gathering the four papers: no man beneath the believer; the seam captured, not emptied; the exploit firing on new materials; and the reading that the militant atheist was usually sincere and blinkered, his doctrine drawing the field so the load-bearing function of faith was invisible.

8 — The Softer Path That Held. The contrast that proves the thesis by inversion: laïcité and the establishment clause removed religion from the *state* without trying to remove it from the *people* — they widened the field instead of razing the seam, and they held. And the strongest counter, fairly stated.

Coda — The Argument Without the Sword. The New Atheism as the imposture theory shorn of state violence: the one modern attempt that kept to persuasion, and what it did and did not achieve.

PART 1

The Premise, Named

> *That the whole modern war on religion rests on a single theory — that religion is an imposture, a lie deliberately fashioned by priests in league with kings to keep the many docile and the few in power — so that religion is not a mistake people fell into but a fraud done to them, and can therefore be undone: strip the lie away by reason and the free, rational human being stands up underneath; that the Enlightenment gave this theory its sharpest expression, in the clandestine literature of the "three impostors," in Meslier and d'Holbach and above all in Voltaire's battle-cry écrasez l'infâme; and that the tell was there from the beginning, because even Voltaire, who wished the infamous thing crushed, wished it crushed only among the thinking few and wanted the rabble to keep their God — the first, unwitting admission that the belief was doing work the philosopher could not do without*

EVERY WAR ON RELIGION BEGINS WITH A THEORY OF WHAT religion is, and the theory is always the same one, because only that theory licenses the war. If religion were a mistake — an honest error people fell into trying to explain a world too large for them — then the response to it would be education, the patient widening of what a person can see, and no one burns a church to correct an honest error. But if religion is an *imposture* — a lie deliberately manufactured and imposed, a fraud worked upon the many by the few who profit from it — then it is not an error to be corrected but a crime to be stopped, and the machinery of the crime, the priests and the temples and the sacred books, becomes a legitimate target for demolition. This is the premise beneath every campaign in this paper, and it is worth naming precisely, because it is the same premise *The Man Under-*

neath identified under the name of false consciousness, arriving a full century before Marx: the claim that the belief a person holds is not really his, but a counterfeit installed in him by those who mean to use him, so that beneath the counterfeit there waits a truer self — here, the rational, secular, undeceived human being — whom the demolition will set free.

The Enlightenment did not invent the imposture theory, but it gave it its sharpest modern edge. Its rawest form was the clandestine *Treatise of the Three Impostors*, a book that circulated in secret manuscript through eighteenth-century Europe and named Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad as three deceivers who had each fabricated a religion to master a credulous people — the founders of the great faiths recast as con men, and faith itself as the long shadow of their con. In the atheist priest Jean Meslier the theory found a voice of extraordinary bitterness: his posthumous *Testament*, the first sustained written defence of atheism in French, denounced religion as a fraud propping up the powerful, and gave rise to the phrase, adapted and made famous by Diderot in a couplet and often misattributed to Voltaire, that humanity would not be free until the last king was strangled with the entrails — the guts — of the last priest. The line's savagery is the imposture theory's emotional core laid bare: king and priest are one apparatus, throne and altar a single machine of deceit, and the killing of the one is continuous with the killing of the other. In the Baron d'Holbach, whose *System of Nature* of 1770 was the first openly atheist book published in France, the theory acquired a full materialist metaphysics: no God, no soul, no purpose in nature, and religion an invention of fear exploited by priestcraft. And in the Marquis de Condorcet, writing his *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind* while in hiding from the Terror that his own party had loosed, it acquired its optimism — the confidence that superstition would recede as reason advanced, that the arc of history bent away from the priest and toward the philosopher.

But the figure who fixed the premise in the modern mind was Voltaire, and it is worth dwelling on him, because the tell that undoes the whole project is already visible in the most famous atheist-adjacent writer of the age — who was not, in fact, an atheist at all. Voltaire's war-cry, repeated across his letters from around 1759 and sometimes used as a signature, was *écrasez l'infâme* — "crush the infamous thing" — and the infamous thing was the Church, or superstition, or fanaticism, the exact referent shifting but the target always the apparatus of organised religion and the intolerance he saw it breed. To Frederick the Great he wrote that a wise prince "with money, troops, and laws, can quite well govern men without the aid of religion, which was made only to deceive them" — the imposture theory in a single clause, religion as deception, pure and unadorned. And yet in the same breath Voltaire drew the line that gives the whole game away. He wished the infamous thing extirpated, he told Frederick, "I do not say among the rabble, who are not worthy of being enlightened, and who are apt for every yoke; I say among honest people, among men who think." The fraud, in other words, was to be swept from the minds of the educated elite — but the common people were to keep it, because Voltaire understood, as every governor understands, that a population without a sacred order is a harder population to hold. "I want my lawyer, my tailor, and my wife to believe in God," he has a character say, "so, I imagine, I shall be less robbed and less deceived." And in the line that has outlived all his others: *if God did not exist, it would be necessary to invent him.*

Hold that admission against the theory it accompanies, because the contradiction is the seed of everything this paper will trace. Voltaire says in one breath that religion is a fraud made only to deceive, and in the next that the fraud must be kept in place for the tailor and the wife, because without it they cannot be trusted and society cannot be held. But a fraud you must keep because society collapses without it is not merely a fraud; it is *infrastructure*. It is doing work — holding the population's honesty, softening

the cost of order, standing where a sacred authority has to stand — that the philosopher, for all his reason, has nothing to put in its place. Voltaire, the arch-mocker, the man who made the crushing of the infamous thing his life's refrain, flinched at the last from his own conclusion and left the altar standing for everyone but himself. That flinch is the imposture theory conceding, without knowing it, the framework's whole case: the belief is load-bearing, the population is held partly by it, and the philosopher who imagines he can pull it away and leave the structure standing has not understood what the structure is made of. The revolutionaries who came after Voltaire would not flinch. They would take the imposture theory to its conclusion and try to pull the belief away from everyone at once. And they would discover, at enormous cost, what Voltaire had quietly known.

PART 2

Wither or Smash

> *That the genealogy of the war on religion forks at Marx, and the fork matters, because it separates two very different policies that the twentieth century ran together to its cost; that Marx himself, in the passage everyone quotes and few finish, called religion the opium of the people but also the sigh of the oppressed creature and the heart of a heartless world — a symptom of real suffering, not merely a swindle — and held that the struggle against religion was indirectly the struggle against the conditions that produced it, so that religion would wither of itself once those conditions were changed, and needed no direct assault; that Lenin sharpened the symptom back into a swindle and made militant atheism a duty of the party; and that the failures this paper records indict the assaulting wing hardest, while the withering wing quietly concedes the framework's point — that you change what a man believes by changing his formation and his conditions, never by tearing the belief out of him while the conditions that grow it remain*

The imposture theory passed from the philosophers to the revolutionaries, but on the way it split, and the split is the most important thing in this paper's genealogy, because the two branches recommend opposite policies and the catastrophes belong overwhelmingly to one of them. The branch point is Karl Marx, and to see the fork one has to read the famous passage in full rather than in the four words everyone remembers. In the introduction to his *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, written in 1843 and published the following year, Marx wrote: "Religious suffering is at the same time the expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature,

THE HEART OF A HEARTLESS WORLD, AND THE SOUL OF SOULLESS conditions. It is the opium of the people." The line that survives in popular memory is only the last sentence, and shorn of what precedes it, it reads as pure contempt — religion as a drug pushed on the masses. But Marx's fuller thought is subtler and, for our purposes, decisive. Religion, in this account, is not primarily a fraud imposed from above; it is a *symptom* generated from below, the cry of a creature in real pain, the warmth it reaches for in a world that has none to give. The opium is not administered by a swindler to a dupe; it is grasped by a sufferer to bear the unbearable. And from this Marx drew the conclusion that separates his branch from the older imposture theory: because religion is a symptom of real conditions, "the struggle against religion is indirectly the struggle against that world whose spiritual aroma is religion." You do not abolish the halo by tearing it off; you abolish the vale of tears it crowns, and the halo fades of itself. Religion, on Marx's account, would *wither* — dissolve as the material misery that produced it dissolved — and required no war, because a war on the symptom while the disease raged on was worse than useless.

This is the withering branch, and it is worth marking that, whatever else is wrong with it, it lands on the framework's side of a crucial line. To say that belief is grown by conditions and formation, and changes only when conditions and formation change, is precisely the framework's account of how the benefit dial is set — installed early, by a person's whole world, and re-set only by study, by conversion, by the widened horizon, almost never by force applied to the belief itself. The withering thesis is wrong in its confidence that religion is *merely* a symptom of material misery and would vanish once misery did; the persistence of faith among the comfortable and the free has refuted that timetable many times over. But it is right that you do not change what a man holds sacred by attacking the sacred thing; you change it, if at all, by changing the man's world so that he comes to hold something else. The withering wing, in other words, would never have

burned a church, because on its own theory burning the church accomplishes nothing while the conditions that fill it remain.

The other branch runs through Lenin, and it takes the symptom and hardens it back into a swindle. Lenin kept Marx's sociology but discarded his patience. In "Socialism and Religion," published in a Bolshevik paper in December 1905, he wrote that "religion is one of the forms of spiritual oppression which everywhere weighs down heavily upon the masses of the people," and then, invoking Marx's line and twisting its temperature: "Religion is opium for the people. Religion is a sort of spiritual booze, in which the slaves of capital drown their human image, their demand for a life more or less worthy of man." The shift from *of* to *for* — opium *of* the people, the thing they reach for, becoming opium *for* the people, the thing administered to them — is the whole distance from Marx to Lenin. For Lenin the party could not be neutral; atheism was a duty, the propagation of the materialist worldview a task of the revolutionary, and religion an enemy to be combated, not merely a symptom to be outgrown. He tempered the tactics — warning against giving the clergy the gift of martyrdom, insisting the struggle be subordinated to the class struggle — but the direction was set. In "On the Significance of Militant Materialism," written in 1922 with the Bolsheviks now in power, he called for tireless atheist propaganda and the exposure of religion by every means. The symptom had become the swindle again; the withering had become the war.

It was the Leninist branch — the imposture theory revived, married to the machinery of a seized state — that the twentieth century put into practice, and the marriage was consummated in a particular place. As the project's study of the Paris apparatus records, the French Communist Party of the early and middle twentieth century served as the institutional incubator where a Jacobin-Marxist synthesis was transmitted to a generation of revolutionaries, colonial students among them, who absorbed not only a theory but a whole repertoire of practice — and the "cultural-

revolutionary inheritance" they carried away included, as an explicit and codified licence, the proposition that a revolutionary regime was entitled and obliged to dismantle religion. That licence reached back, in its own self-understanding, past Marx to the Jacobins — to the Republican Calendar and the dechristianisation of 1793 — and forward into every regime this paper will examine. So the genealogy is complete: an Enlightenment theory that religion is an imposture; a fork at Marx between letting it wither and smashing it; a Leninist decision to smash; and a Paris conduit that carried the decision to smash into a dozen states across the century. What that decision produced, when it met a real population with a real faith, is the rest of the paper.

PART 3

France

The First Attempt, and the Recoil Written Into Its Own History

> *That revolutionary France ran the first full experiment and, within a single decade, ran the refutation as well — beginning with the seizure of the Church's wealth and the subordination of its clergy, escalating into the dechristianisation of 1793 with its closed churches and its Republican Calendar and its Cult of Reason enthroned on the altar of Notre-Dame, and then recoiling, within the Revolution itself, when Robespierre — who denounced atheism as aristocratic — tore down the Cult of Reason and built in its place the Cult of the Supreme Being, a state religion complete with festival and creed, because the Revolution had discovered that it could not govern a people with no sacred order at all; that the assault meanwhile helped set the Vendée aflame and alienated the Catholic peasantry it was meant to free; and that the whole experiment ended where it was always going to end, in Napoleon's Concordat of 1801, the state suing for peace with the Church it had tried to abolish — the failure written, in the plainest possible ink, into a treaty*

France ran the experiment first, and France also ran, faster than anywhere else, the refutation — so that the whole arc of the thing, the assault and the recoil and the surrender, is compressed into a single decade and can be read almost as a controlled demonstration. It began not with atheism but with expropriation and control, which the framework would predict, because the first thing a new order does to an old robe is seize the wealth and capture the interpreters. On the night of 4 August 1789 the

Revolution abolished the tithe; in November 1789 it nationalised the lands of the Church, an immense transfer of wealth from the old sacred order to the new secular one; and in July 1790 the Civil Constitution of the Clergy reorganised the Church as a department of the state, its bishops and priests to be elected and salaried like officials and required to swear an oath to the constitution. The oath split the French clergy in two — the "juring" priests who swore and the "refractory" priests who refused — and that fracture, a wound the Revolution itself opened in the body of French Catholicism, would bleed for a decade and feed the counter-revolution.

Then, in the autumn of 1793, the assault turned from control to abolition, and the imposture theory took the stage in person. This was the dechristianisation campaign, and what it *proposed and instituted* is worth stating concretely, because the concreteness is the point. It rebuilt time itself: the Republican Calendar, adopted in October 1793 and dated from the founding of the Republic in September 1792, abolished the seven-day week with its Sunday and swept away the entire calendar of saints' days and feasts, replacing them with a decimal grid of ten-day *décades* named for seeds and tools and animals — an attempt to reach into the very rhythm of a peasant's year and pull the sacred out of it. It closed churches by the thousand and forbade the Catholic Mass in Paris by late November 1793. It stripped altars, melted sacred vessels, and staged iconoclastic carnivals in which religious and royal images were defaced together. In the region around Nevers, the representative-on-mission Joseph Fouché — later Napoleon's minister of police — gave the movement one of its purest images when he ordered that the gates of every cemetery bear a single inscription: *La mort est un sommeil éternel*, "Death is an eternal sleep." The line is the imposture theory carved in stone at the threshold of the grave: no soul, no heaven, no judgement, the consolation of the dying revoked by decree.

And on the altar of Notre-Dame, on 10 November 1793 — the 20th of Brumaire in the Revolution's Year II — the campaign raised its own goddess. This was the Fête de la Raison, the Festival of Reason, organised by Pierre-Gaspard Chaumette, procurator of the Paris Commune, and supervised by the radicals Jacques Hébert and Antoine-François Momoro; the cathedral was rechristened a Temple of Reason, a papier-mâché mountain was raised in the nave, and a living woman — an actress, so that no one could mistake her for an idol — was borne aloft as the personification of Liberty and Reason to receive the homage of the crowd. Chaumette announced to the Convention what the day had accomplished, and his words are the imposture theory in triumph: fanaticism, he declared, had given way to truth, its squinting eyes unable to bear the light; the Gothic vaults that had echoed only lies now heard the voice of truth; the people had only one cry — *no more priests, no other god than the one nature offers us.* The Cult of Reason was France's first state-sponsored atheistic religion, and note already the shape of the thing: it was not the *absence* of a cult but the *replacement* of one, with a goddess and a temple and a liturgy of its own. The altar was not emptied. It was restocked.

And then came the recoil — and it came not from the Revolution's enemies but from its own leadership, which is what makes it such powerful evidence. Maximilien Robespierre, the Revolution's dominant figure by the winter of 1793–94, looked at the Cult of Reason and recognised a danger. He was no friend of the Catholic Church, but he was a disciple of Rousseau and a believer in a Supreme Being, and he regarded the atheism of Hébert and Chaumette as both false and, more to the point, *politically ruinous* — a thing that would sever the Revolution from a people who believed, and hand its enemies a weapon. His formulation is one of the most revealing sentences the whole episode produced: "Atheism is aristocratic; the idea of a great Being that watches over oppressed innocence and punishes triumphant crime is altogether popular." Read what that says. It says that

atheism is the luxury of a privileged few — the salon, the philosophe, the man of leisure and education — and that the belief in a watching, judging God is the possession of the common people, bound up with their sense of justice and their hope of it. It is Voltaire's flinch turned into state policy: the sacred order is load-bearing, the people are held partly by it, and to tear it away is not to free them but to unmoor them and to unmoor the Revolution from them.

So Robespierre destroyed the Cult of Reason and built another in its place. In March 1794 the Hébertistes were sent to the guillotine, and the atheist cult lost its leaders. Then, by a decree of the Convention on the 18th of Floréal, Year II — 7 May 1794 — Robespierre had the Republic proclaim a new state religion. Its founding article read: *"The French people recognise the existence of the Supreme Being and the immortality of the soul."* Further articles declared that the worship worthy of this Being was the practice of the duties of man — to detest tyranny and bad faith, to punish traitors, to succour the unfortunate, to respect the weak, to defend the oppressed. This was the Cult of the Supreme Being, a deistic state religion with a creed, and it was inaugurated on the 20th of Prairial — 8 June 1794 — in a vast festival staged across Paris by the painter Jacques-Louis David, at which Robespierre, presiding, set fire to a figure representing Atheism, from whose flames a statue of Wisdom emerged intact. The tableau is almost too perfect a summary of the argument this paper is making: the Revolution, having tried atheism, publicly *burned* it, and enthroned in its place a new sacred order, because it had found that it could not stand without one. The altar the Revolution had emptied it now, with its own hands, refilled.

The Cult of the Supreme Being did not outlive its founder — Robespierre went to the guillotine seven weeks later, on the 10th of Thermidor, and his religion died with him — but the deeper lesson was already inscribed, and the rest of the decade only underlined it. The assault on the Church had helped to inflame the great counter-revolution of the

Vendée, where a Catholic peasantry, its refractory priests hunted and its faith outlawed and its sons conscripted, rose against the Republic in 1793 in a war of extraordinary savagery that would cost, by estimates that remain contested and range widely, well over a hundred thousand lives and perhaps far more — a catastrophe in which the war on the peasants' religion was not the only cause but was among the sparks, and in which the people the Revolution meant to liberate took up arms to defend the very thing it was destroying for their good. And the whole experiment ended where the imposture theory always ends when it meets a real population: in a treaty of surrender. Napoleon Bonaparte, who held few religious convictions of his own but understood power as few men ever have, negotiated the Concordat of 1801 with Pope Pius VII, restoring the Catholic Church to a recognised place in French life, because he grasped that a France at war with the faith of most of its people was a France that could not be governed cheaply. He banned both revolutionary cults, the Cult of Reason and the Cult of the Supreme Being alike, by his Law on Cults in the spring of 1802. France remained overwhelmingly Catholic through the whole of the nineteenth century. The decade of assault had killed enormously, remade the calendar, closed the churches, enthroned a goddess and then a Supreme Being on the altar of Notre-Dame — and at the end of it, the Church stood, the people believed, and the state had signed a peace. It is the argument of this paper written small and fast, and every case that follows is a slower repetition of it.

PART 4

Russia

The Most Sustained Attempt in History, and the Refutations It Left in the Record

> *That the Soviet Union mounted the most powerful, prolonged, and resourced war on religion the world has seen, and that the record of it contains, sitting in plain sight, the evidence of its own defeat; that the state confiscated and closed churches by the tens of thousands, killed clergy by the tens of thousands, and built a mass organisation — the League of the Militant Godless — to carry atheism into every workplace and school, even launching a "godless five-year plan" whose stated aim was that not one house of worship remain by 1937; that in that very year the census the state itself commissioned found a clear majority of citizens still declaring themselves believers, a result so unwelcome that the census was suppressed and its organisers shot; that when the German invasion came the same state that had spent two decades trying to abolish the Church turned around and rehired it for the war, the way an earlier retreat had rehired the market — because it needed what only the Church could give; and that after seventy years, the moment the pressure lifted, religion returned in a flood, so that the cathedral the Soviets dynamited to build a temple to Lenin was rebuilt, and consecrated, on the same ground*

If France ran the experiment fast, the Soviet Union ran it slow, deep, and at a scale nothing before it approached — and precisely because the Soviet effort was so total and so long-sustained, its failure is the most instructive of all, because the state could not, over seventy years, plausibly claim it had simply not tried hard enough. It tried as hard as

a modern state can try. Within weeks of taking power the Bolsheviks separated Church from state and stripped the Orthodox Church of its legal standing and its property; in 1922, under cover of famine relief, they seized the Church's valuables, and thousands died in the clashes that seizure provoked. In 1929 the Law on Religious Associations reduced permitted religious life to bare liturgy within the walls of a licensed few churches, forbidding religious education, charity, publication, and any activity beyond the service itself — a legal strangulation designed to let the Church exist only as a shrinking husk. And the numbers of the assault are staggering: of roughly 46,000 Orthodox churches functioning before the Revolution, by 1939 something on the order of a few hundred remained open; clergy were arrested, imprisoned in the camps, and executed in numbers that the contested records place in the tens of thousands, with the terror of 1937–38 falling on them with particular ferocity.

To carry the war into the texture of daily life, the state built an instrument the framework should pause on, because it is the seam-capture made flesh. This was the League of the Militant Godless, founded in 1925 as the League of the Godless and given its harder name in 1929, led by the Old Bolshevik Yemelyan Yaroslavsky and organised, deliberately, as a mirror-image of the Church and the Party at once — cells in every factory and school and housing block, a press headed by the newspaper *Bezbozhnik* ("The Godless"), a membership that at its peak in the early 1930s claimed some five and a half million. Its slogan was blunt: *the struggle against religion is the struggle for socialism.* It staged blasphemous carnivals mocking the Christmas and Easter liturgies, sent its youth wing to disrupt services, confiscated icons for museums of atheism — the great Kazan Cathedral in Leningrad was turned into a Museum of the History of Religion and Atheism — and worked, in the framework's exact terms, to empty the seam of its old interpreters and install new ones, the Godless lecturer replacing the priest as the authorised reader of reality. From 1932 the League drove

what was called, in the register of the age, a "godless five-year plan," a schedule for the elimination of religion as if it were an industrial target, whose aim, broadcast in the propaganda, was that by 1937 not one functioning house of worship should remain and the very word "God" be struck from the dictionaries.

And here the record does something that no propaganda could undo: it refutes the plan in the same breath that the plan is running. In 1937 the Soviet state conducted a census, and at Stalin's own instruction a question on religious belief was added to the form — a question no previous Soviet census had asked. It was asked of a population that knew exactly what belief could cost: the priest already arrested, the neighbour already shot, the rumour already spreading that those who registered as believers would be exiled and their children expelled from school. And still, when the returns came in, a clear majority of adult citizens — the standard figure is about 56.7 per cent, some fifty-five million people, and two-thirds in the countryside — declared themselves believers. After two decades of the most sustained atheist campaign in history, with the churches closed and the clergy in the camps and the schools teaching godlessness, most of the population, asked at real risk, said it still believed. The result was so intolerable that the state suppressed the census entirely, classified its findings, and had its organisers — including the head of the census administration, Ivan Kraval — arrested and shot as saboteurs. This is the empirical refutation of the whole enterprise, and the enterprise knew it, and its response to being refuted by its own instrument was to kill the men who held the instrument. The belief the state had spent twenty years and uncounted lives trying to abolish was still there in the people, and the census was the mirror the state could not bear to look into.

Then came the confession that is the exact analogue of the earlier retreat the project has called the NEP move — the doctrine, having failed, quietly rehiring what it had abolished. When Germany invaded in 1941 and the

state's survival was at stake, Stalin needed something the Party could not manufacture: he needed the population's deepest loyalties mobilised, and he needed to show his Western allies a tolerant face. And so the same state that had spent two decades trying to destroy the Orthodox Church turned around and *rehired* it. The anti-religious periodicals were shut; churches reopened; and on 4 September 1943 Stalin received in the Kremlin the three surviving senior metropolitans of the Orthodox Church — Sergius, Alexius, and Nicholas — and permitted them to convene a council, which four days later elected Sergius Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia, the office the Bolsheviks had left vacant for two decades. The League of the Militant Godless was wound down and formally dissolved in 1947. The state had not been converted; it would resume the pressure after the war, and Khrushchev would launch a fresh campaign between 1958 and 1964 that closed thousands of churches again. But the meaning of 1943 is unmistakable and it is the meaning the whole paper is tracing: at the moment of maximum need, the officially atheist state reached for the very thing it had tried to abolish, because the sacred order could do work — could reach into a people and move them — that the doctrine could not do at all.

And there is a single object in Moscow that holds the entire arc, and it is the emblem this paper will keep. In 1931, on Stalin's order, the Bolsheviks dynamited the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour — the great church built to thank God for Russia's deliverance from Napoleon — to clear the ground for a Palace of the Soviets, a colossal tower to be crowned by a statue of Lenin taller than the cathedral had been. The palace was never built; the funds ran out, the foundations flooded, the war came, and where the church had stood there was first a hole and then, from 1960, under Khrushchev, the largest open-air swimming pool in the world. That is the perfect image of the emptied altar: the sacred razed for a temple to the new god that could not be completed, and a pool of water in the pit. But the arc did not end there. In the 1990s, the moment the Soviet order fell, more than

a million Muscovites gave money to rebuild the cathedral, and it rose again, an exact replica, and was consecrated in the year 2000 — and one of the first things done within its walls was the canonisation of Tsar Nicholas II and his family, the last sovereign of the old sacred order, murdered by the men who built the new one. Seventy years of the most powerful war on religion in human history, and the altar refilled with the same God, on the same ground, the moment the force was lifted. The pool became a font.

PART 5

The State That Became a Church

> *That the deepest evidence against the war on religion is not that it failed to abolish the old faith, damning as that is, but that it could not help building a new one — because the machinery that makes a person a believer does not switch off when the churches close, and a large society cannot run on no managed belief at all; that the officially atheist Soviet state therefore grew, first without meaning to and then quite deliberately, a complete apparatus of the sacred it had abolished in others: an incorruptible relic in the embalmed founder and a place of pilgrimage in his tomb, saints and martyrs and icons, a liturgical calendar of revolutionary feasts, a catechism in the memorised canon, a doctrine of the fall and the redemption and the coming kingdom, and — most tellingly — an inquisition, in the show trial where the heretic is made to confess his sins against the true faith before he is destroyed; that this is not the tired quip that "communism was just a religion," but the framework's prediction, because the exploit cannot be disarmed, only redirected, and the state that razes the seam is compelled to occupy it; and that Marxism is the one doctrine that contains, within itself, the tool to see this, since its own theory of ideology, turned on a Marxist state, reads that state's new cult exactly as it reads every old one*

The failures of the last two parts are failures of the first kind — the war could not abolish the old faith, which persisted underground and revived the moment it could. But there is a second and deeper kind of failure, and it is the one that carries the whole argument, because it shows that even a *total* success would not have been liberation.

Suppose the war had worked; suppose the old faith had been genuinely erased. The framework predicts that the ground would not have stayed clear, because the disposition to believe is not a doctrine that can be deleted but a feature of the human mind — the readiness to defer to a marked authority, to belong to a sacred group, to hold some things beyond calculation, to organise the world through story — and that disposition, the project's foundational account of the exploit shows, does not switch off when its old object is removed. It fires on whatever is put before it. So a society that abolishes its church does not become a society with no church; it becomes a society whose church is unacknowledged, and therefore unexamined, and therefore worse. The Soviet case is the demonstration, because the officially atheist state grew, over its lifetime, a nearly complete apparatus of the sacred — and it grew it not as hypocrisy but as necessity, the machine reaching for the parts it could not run without.

Consider the inventory, and set each item beside the thing it replaced. Where the old faith had incorruptible relics, the new order embalmed the body of Lenin, laid it in a mausoleum on Red Square, and drew to it a queue of pilgrims that ran for decades — a preserved and venerated corpse at the sacred centre of a state that denied the soul. Where the old faith had saints and martyrs, the new order canonised its own: the boy Pavlik Morozov, said to have denounced his own father to the state and been killed for it, held up to every schoolchild as a martyr to a higher loyalty; the fallen heroes of the Revolution enrolled in a calendar of the blessed. Where the old faith had icons, the new order hung the portrait of the leader in every office and classroom and home, an image before which one stood in a fixed devotion; the Bolshevik primer *The ABC of Communism* had even instructed that children be given an "atheist's corner" to replace the icon corner of the Orthodox home — the very form of the shrine preserved and its contents swapped, which is the whole mechanism in a single domestic detail. Where the old faith had a liturgical year, the new order built one, its

feasts the anniversaries of the Revolution and of Labour, its processions the great parades, marching where the religious processions had marched. Where the old faith had a catechism, the new order had its memorised canon, the *Short Course* history of the Party dispensed as revealed doctrine to be learned and recited. Where the old faith had a sacred history — creation, fall, redemption, and the kingdom to come — the new order had its own eschatology, the primitive communism of the beginning, the fall into class society, the redemptive revolution, and the classless future that stood where heaven had stood.

And where the old faith had its inquisition — the tribunal that examined the heretic, extracted his confession, and destroyed him for the health of the faithful — the new order had the show trial, and here the parallel is not decoration but structure. The Moscow trials of the late 1930s were not primarily about establishing facts; they were rites, in which the accused was made to stand before the assembled faithful and *confess* — to name his own thoughts as heresies, to abase himself before the doctrine he had betrayed, to affirm the truth of the very system that was about to kill him. The auto-da-fé of the Inquisition had the identical form and the identical function: the public confession of the heretic is the ritual by which the community's faith is renewed at the spectacle of its violation. A state that has genuinely left religion behind does not need its enemies to confess their sins against the doctrine before it shoots them; a state that needs the confession has not left religion behind at all. It has rebuilt the inquisition and forgotten that it did.

It must be said carefully what this observation is and is not. It is *not* the tired and lazy claim that "communism was really just a religion," offered as a debater's gotcha to embarrass the atheist. That claim, made glibly, explains nothing. The point here is structural and it is a prediction of the framework: the exploit — the ancient mind's readiness to be governed through belief — cannot be disarmed, because it is not a bug that a

sufficiently rigorous ideology could patch, but the standing condition of a large society organised through symbols it cannot verify. It can only be *re-directed*. And so the energy that had flowed to the church, dammed at its old outlet, did not disappear; it found the new channel the state had dug and filled it, and the state that had set out to abolish the sacred found itself its high priest, administering relics and saints and a catechism and an inquisition, and calling the whole apparatus science. The altar cannot be emptied. Break the idol and the reverence it carried does not evaporate; it goes looking for a new idol, and it does not have to look far, because the state that broke the old one is standing right there, offering itself.

There is a final turn here that makes the Soviet case sharper than any other, and the project's study of the doctrine's self-knowledge has already named it: Marxism is the one legitimating belief in the whole corpus that contains, within itself, the instrument of its own unmasking. Every other robe — the Roman imperial cult, the divine right of the Most Christian King, the Orthodox sanctification of the Tsar — was a belief that legitimated an order without containing a theory of what it was doing. Marxism is different, because Marxism *is*, among other things, a theory of ideology: an analysis of exactly how ruling classes install legitimating beliefs in the populations they govern, of religion as the opium that reconciles the oppressed to their oppression, of the ruling ideas of an age as the ideas of its ruling class. And the moment a Marxist state builds its own cult — its relics and saints and catechism and inquisition — that very tool can be turned upon it, and it reads the new sacred order precisely as it read every old one: a governing group installing a legitimating belief in the population it rules, an opium dispensed to reconcile the governed to the order the rulers have built. The doctrine fashioned to unmask the priests of every other faith contains, exactly, the instrument for unmasking its own. The militant atheist set out to expose religion as the ruling class's fraud, and ended by manufacturing,

and requiring, a fraud of his own that his own theory convicts. That is not the failure of the war on religion at its edges. That is its failure at its centre.

PART 6

The Same Shape Everywhere

> *That the pattern set in France and Russia recurs, with local materials but the identical structure, across every place the war on religion was carried — so that the recurrence itself becomes evidence, best explained not by any coordination among the regimes but by position logic at scale, the same false premise drawn from the same genealogy meeting the same human mind and producing the same recoil; that in Mexico the enforcement of anticlerical law provoked an armed peasant rising under the banner of Christ the King, which the state could end only by suing for peace; that in Republican Spain the burning of churches and the killing of thousands of clergy drove the Catholic population into the arms of Franco and helped lose the Republic its war; that in Albania the most thoroughgoing attempt of all — the world's first constitutionally atheist state — could not prevent the faith from surviving in secret and returning in full; that in Mongolia the destruction of the monasteries was a near-extermination of the monks that nonetheless left Buddhism to revive within a generation of the pressure lifting; and that in Cambodia the Khmer Rouge came closest of any regime to erasing a religion outright and still watched it regrow from the ground the moment they fell*

THE STRONGEST SINGLE PIECE OF EVIDENCE IN THIS PAPER IS not any one case but their sameness, because when a structure repeats across societies that did not coordinate — Catholic Mexico and Orthodox Russia and Buddhist Mongolia and Muslim-and-Christian Albania — the repetition asks to be explained, and the framework's explanation is the one

THAT FITS: NOT A CONSPIRACY OF ATHEIST STATES PASSING notes, but position logic at scale, the same premise drawn from the same Enlightenment-and-Leninist genealogy, placed in the same seat of a seized state, meeting the same human population with the same ancient mind, and producing, again and again, the same recoil. Run through them quickly, because the point is the pattern and the pattern is quickly seen.

In Mexico the trigger was the Calles Law of 14 June 1926, by which President Plutarco Elías Calles enforced with criminal penalties the anticlerical articles of the 1917 Constitution — priests required to register with the state, foreign clergy expelled, religious orders and religious schooling banned, clerical dress forbidden in public, the number of priests capped. The Church responded by suspending public worship, and the Catholic peasantry of the centre-west responded by taking up arms, in a rising whose battle-cry was *¡Viva Cristo Rey!* — "Long live Christ the King!" The Cristero War of 1926–29 cost on the order of ninety thousand lives, by the standard estimate, with higher figures reaching much further when the displaced are counted, and it ended not in the state's victory but in a negotiated peace, the *arreglos* of 1929, brokered with the help of the United States ambassador Dwight Morrow, by which the government quietly agreed to relax an enforcement it had found it could not sustain against a people willing to die for the Mass. The anticlerical articles stayed on the books, unenforced, until they were finally repealed in the 1990s; the martyrs the state had made were canonised by the Church at the century's end. The attempt to break the people's faith by law had produced a war, a stalemate, and a treaty — the French decade in miniature, on another continent, a hundred and thirty years later.

In Spain the sequence was uglier and the own-goal more complete. The anticlericalism of the Second Republic, from the church-burnings of 1931 onward, curdled after the outbreak of civil war in 1936 into the Red Terror, in which anarchist, socialist, and communist militias in the Republican

zone killed clergy on a scale the standard scholarly count — Antonio Montero Moreno's — puts at 6,832: thirteen bishops, more than four thousand priests and seminarians, over two thousand monks and friars, nearly three hundred nuns, most of them murdered in the war's first months, along with thousands of lay Catholics; churches were burned and looted in the thousands. And the effect of this slaughter was the opposite of liberation: it drove a wavering, reform-minded Catholic population decisively toward the Nationalist rising, let Franco cast his cause as a crusade in defence of the faith, and consecrated the alliance of Church and dictatorship that would rule Spain for the next four decades. The Republican president Manuel Azaña had declared in 1931 that Spain had ceased to be Catholic; the terror unleashed in the Republic's name proved him catastrophically wrong and handed his enemies the very banner they needed. The assault on the Church did not weaken the Church's hold; it strengthened it, and helped lose the Republic the war.

In Albania the attempt was the most thoroughgoing the world has seen, and it still failed. Enver Hoxha, in a speech of 6 February 1967, launched a campaign that by the year's end had closed or converted or destroyed all 2,169 houses of worship in the country — mosques, Orthodox and Catholic churches, the Bektashi lodges alike — and declared Albania the world's first officially atheist state. The 1976 constitution wrote atheism into fundamental law: its Article 37 provided that "the state recognises no religion whatever and supports atheist propaganda for the purpose of inculcating the scientific materialist world outlook in people," and a later article forbade religious organisations of any kind; the penal code prescribed years of imprisonment for religious propaganda or for possessing religious books, and religious names were banned for newborns. Hoxha declared that the only religion of Albania was Albanism — nationalism installed, explicitly, in the seat religion had held — and the portrait of the leader replaced the icon in the home. Clergy were imprisoned and executed; a

Catholic priest was shot in 1971 for the crime of secretly baptising a child. And yet families kept the faith in secret, hid the feasts, whispered the prayers, and when the ban was lifted in December 1990 the churches and mosques filled again. The most complete war on religion any state ever waged could not reach into the home and switch the belief off; it could only drive it under, where it waited.

In Mongolia the assault took the form of a near-extermination. The Soviet-directed repressions of 1937–39, under Khorloogiin Choibalsan — himself a former monk — fell on a country where perhaps a third of the male population were Buddhist monks and where the monasteries were the sole centres of learning. The number of monks was driven from some eighty thousand or more to under five hundred within about two years; roughly eighteen thousand lamas were executed and the great majority of the country's seven hundred and more monasteries were razed, sometimes used for artillery practice. A leader who had resisted Stalin's order to liquidate the monks was himself executed in 1937. It was, on any honest accounting, one of the bloodiest anti-religious campaigns in history, and one historian of it has observed that the Communists came to believe that if they did not destroy Buddhism, Buddhism would destroy them — an unusually candid recognition that the two were rivals for the same seat, the same seam, and that only one could hold it. And still it failed at the only thing that finally matters: when the Communist order fell in 1990, Buddhism revived, the monasteries began to reopen, and the faith the state had very nearly exterminated returned to a people who had kept it.

And in Cambodia the Khmer Rouge came closer than any regime to erasing a religion outright — and even there the ground would not stay clear. Under Pol Pot's "Year Zero," from 1975 to 1979, Buddhism was outlawed, the roughly sixty-five thousand monks of the country's some three thousand monasteries were defrocked or killed — one estimate is that five of every eight monks were executed — the temples were turned into

prisons and storehouses, and the Buddha images were destroyed. The regime's minister of culture, Yun Yat, declared in 1978 that "Buddhism is dead, and the ground has been cleared" for a new revolutionary culture — the imposture theory's fantasy stated with perfect clarity, the seam emptied so that the new order might occupy it. This is the same movement whose intellectual formation the project's study of the Paris apparatus traced to the French Communist study circles, and whose leading theorist had argued in a Paris thesis that the cities and their inhabitants were parasites on those who worked the land. And yet within months of the regime's fall, Buddhism began to return; the pagoda committees were among the very first social institutions to re-form spontaneously in the wreckage, and monks were reordained and the temples rebuilt. China's own Cultural Revolution had run the same script a decade earlier, sending the Red Guards to "destroy the Four Olds" — old ideas, culture, customs, and habits — smashing temples and churches and mosques across the country; and it was followed, once the pressure eased, by one of the largest religious revivals in human history, hundreds of millions returning to faiths the state had declared abolished, while the state itself fell back on the expensive tools of surveillance and control and on a cultivated nationalism that increasingly wears the vestments of a civic religion. Six regimes, six creeds, six peoples, one shape: the assault, the recoil, the revival. That is not coincidence, and it is not conspiracy. It is what the war on religion *is*, seen enough times to see the pattern.

PART 7

Why It Could Not Work

> *That the recurrence across all these cases is not bad luck or insufficient zeal but structural necessity, and the three foundations of the project name the three reasons exactly; that first, as The Man Underneath established, there is no rational man beneath the believer to free, because his faith is not a veil over a self but a load-bearing part of the self — his community, his consolation, his frame for a hard life — so that the assault does not liberate but bereaves, which is why the freed everywhere rise to defend what was taken; that second, the seam cannot be abolished but only captured, because the division of knowing is permanent and a people must always depend on some interpreter for what it cannot verify, so that razing the priests does not open a clearing of free reason but merely vacates a seat that the commissar and the Godless lecturer immediately fill, and fill worse, because unchecked and held by force; that third, the exploit cannot be disarmed but only redirected, so that the machinery of belief re-instantiates a managed faith whether or not anyone intends it; and that the militant atheist, read by the method, is most often neither a cynic nor a monster but a sincere man blinkered by his own doctrine, which drew the field of his vision so that the load-bearing function of the faith he attacked was the one thing he could not see*

Gather the cases and the question sharpens from *did it fail* to *why must it fail* — because a policy that fails once may have failed by accident, but a policy that fails in this identical shape across France and Russia and Mexico and Spain and Albania and Mongolia and Cambodia and China is failing by structure, and the structure is precisely

WHAT THE PROJECT'S THREE FOUNDATIONAL PAPERS DESCRIBE. There are exactly three reasons the war on religion cannot work, and they are not three guesses but three consequences, each following from a claim the project has established elsewhere on independent grounds.

The first reason is the one *The Man Underneath* established and this paper has assumed throughout: there is no rational man beneath the believer to be freed, because the belief is not a veil laid over a self but a load-bearing part of the self. The militant atheist pictures the peasant as a free, reasonable human being with a superstition strapped over his eyes, and imagines that cutting the strap will let the reasonable man see. But the faith is not a strap over the peasant; it is woven through him — it is the community he turns to for how to live, the consolation by which he bears a hard life and a certain death, the calendar of his year and the meaning of his griefs, the field of what he can even conceive as good. Cut it away and you do not reveal a free rational man blinking in the light; you reveal a bereaved one, standing in the wreckage of the only world he had, and you have not liberated him, you have robbed him. This is why the assault provokes, everywhere and without exception, the same response: the people it was meant to free rise to defend what is being taken from them — the Vendée peasant, the Cristero with *Christ the King* on his lips, the Spanish villager driven to Franco, the Albanian family hiding the feast, the babushka keeping the icon through seventy Soviet years. The framework said to test any liberation by asking the freed man whether he is free; the war on religion ran that test a hundred million times, and the answer, returned in risings and in secret prayers and in the flood of revival the moment the pressure lifted, was no.

The second reason is the one the project's account of the seam and the division of knowing supplies, and it is the reason the emptied altar refills: the seam cannot be abolished, only captured. A people in a society of any size cannot verify for itself most of what it must believe — the shape of the

cosmos, the meaning of death, the justice of the order it lives under — and so it depends, always and necessarily, on some interpreter to furnish what it cannot reach alone: the priest, the scholar, the elder, the one who stands at the chokepoint where the unverifiable enters the common mind. That dependence is permanent; it is a fact about knowing at scale, not a feature of any particular religion. And so when the militant atheist kills the priests and razes the temples, he does not open a clearing in which free reason will spontaneously grow. He merely empties a seat — and the seat does not stay empty, because it cannot; it is filled at once by the new interpreter the state has been grooming, the commissar and the Godless lecturer and the curator of the museum of atheism, who now stands where the priest stood and reads reality to the people with the state's authority behind him. This is not the abolition of the seam; it is its capture, and the capture is worse than what it replaced, because the plural, slow-grown, mutually checking order of the old interpreters — in which no single authority owned the whole of a people's mind — has been replaced by a single one that does own it, and holds it by force, and brooks no rival. The framework's oldest warning is exactly this figure: the one who razes the plural interpreters and stands alone in the seat he has emptied, more dangerous than any he cleared away, because nothing now stands between him and the people's belief. The militant atheist is that figure wearing the robe of reason.

The third reason is the one this paper has made its centre, and it is the deepest: the exploit cannot be disarmed, only redirected, so that a managed belief re-forms whether or not anyone wills it. The disposition to defer, to belong, to hold sacred, to believe through story is not a doctrine that the right argument could delete; it is the standing architecture of the mind a large society must govern, and it will fasten onto whatever object is placed before it. Remove its old object and it does not fall idle; it seizes a new one — Reason enthroned on the altar, the leader's portrait where the icon hung, the embalmed founder where the relic lay, the classless future where heaven

stood. This is why the officially atheist state does not become a society without a church but a society whose church is unacknowledged, and why the war on religion, even at its most complete, cannot deliver what it promises. It promises to free people from managed belief. But there is no such freedom available, because managed belief is not a chain that the right revolution could strike off; it is what the human mind does in a world it cannot verify, and the only real choice is *which* belief, held *how*, with *how much* recourse for the many — never whether there will be one at all. You cannot have a mass society with no managed belief any more than you can have one with no language. The war promises the impossible and delivers, in the reaching for it, only a worse version of the thing it swore to abolish.

And what of the men who waged it — how does the method read them? Not, for the most part, as cynics, and not as monsters, though the discipline insists that legibility is never pardon and the dead are never made smaller by being explained. The Yaroslavsky organising his Godless League, the Choibalsan signing the death-lists of the monks, the young Khmer cadre carrying home from Paris the licence to raze — most of them, read by the method, were sincere, and their sincerity is exactly what makes them legible. They valued the doctrine, which their formation had installed before they could weigh it, and they acted on it against every signal that it was failing, which reads not as a cynic using a creed but as a true believer executing one. But sincerity does not make them right, and the method has a third category that fits them better than either the sincere-good or the merely wicked: the honest but blinkered — the man who does great harm not against his values and not for his advantage but against a world his doctrine had drawn too narrow for him to see. For this is what the imposture theory does to the field of the visible of the one who holds it: it draws the horizon so that the load-bearing function of the faith — the community it carries, the consolation it gives, the order it cheaply holds — is the one thing that cannot come into view. Inside that field, the peasant's resistance cannot read as a man

defending his world; it can only read as the fraud fighting back, the false consciousness resisting its cure, the priest's poison still working — which is precisely why every backlash was met not with doubt but with more force, every rising taken as proof that the enemy was more entrenched than thought and the assault must be pressed harder. The doctrine that says religion is a fraud to be crushed is a doctrine that cannot see the one fact that would stop it, because seeing that fact would require standing outside the doctrine, and the doctrine draws the field so that there is no outside. That is the blinkered man's tragedy, and his victims', and it is legible, and it is not excused. Debug the machine; do not, in the name of freeing the people from their God, destroy the people who live by Him — who are the only people there are.

PART 8

The Softer Path That Held, and the Strongest Counter

> *That the thesis is proved, finally, by its inversion — by the fact that where religion was removed not from the people but only from the state, the removal held, because it widened the field instead of razing the seam; that the French law of 1905 and the American establishment clause each did the thing the Jacobin did not, guaranteeing freedom of conscience and the free exercise of faith while ending the state's establishment of it, and each endured where the assault collapsed, because they added a door rather than demolishing the house; that this is the reformist conclusion the whole project keeps reaching, to crowd the seam and never to empty it; and that the strongest counter must now be met head-on — the objection that some populations did durably secularise, that France is largely secular today and Albania among the least religious of nations, so that perhaps the war worked after all if given time — answered by distinguishing the slow withering that comes with education and security and the widened horizon, which needs no sword and is the very thing the method blesses, from the direct assault, which everywhere failed; and by observing that even the secular retain the machinery and fasten it onto new sacred things, so that the field can be widened out of a given faith but the mind cannot be emptied of managed belief, and the assault, specifically, cannot do even the first*

THE SUREST PROOF THAT THE WAR ON RELIGION FAILS BE-cause it razes the seam rather than because secularity is impossible lies in the cases where secularity was pursued *without* razing the seam — and

HELD. SET BESIDE THE DECHRISTIANISATION OF 1793 THE FRENCH law of 9 December 1905 on the separation of the Churches and the State, drafted in its conciliatory final form by Aristide Briand against harsher proposals, and the difference is the whole argument. The 1905 law did something the Jacobins never attempted: its first article provided that "the Republic ensures freedom of conscience" and "guarantees the free exercise of religions," subject only to public order, and its second that "the Republic does not recognise, pay, or subsidise any religion." It removed religion from the *state* — ended the establishment, the subsidy, the official standing — while leaving the people entirely free to believe and to worship. It did not close a single church against a willing congregation; it did not raise a goddess on any altar; it did not carve *death is an eternal sleep* on any gate. It widened the field: it added, to a citizen's world, the guaranteed freedom to believe or not believe as he chose, and left the choosing to him. And it held. It became the settled foundation of French public life, the backbone of what the French call *laïcité*, precisely because it did not try to reach into the citizen and switch his belief off, but only to get the state out of the business of setting it. Indeed the pattern is older than 1905 and the contrast is exact: an earlier revolutionary decree of 1795, which simply separated Church and state and proclaimed freedom of worship while withdrawing state support, had *paradoxically led to the reopening of churches* — the moment the assault stopped and mere freedom was granted, the faith came back into the open, which is the whole thesis in a single administrative fact.

The American settlement made the same move from the other direction and with the same result. The First Amendment's provision that "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof" pairs a bar on establishment with a guarantee of free exercise, and its effect over two centuries has been not to empty the American mind of religion — the United States remained among the more religious of developed nations well into the twenty-first century — but to

keep the seam plural and contestable, owned by no single church, so that religious energy dispersed across a thousand competing congregations rather than concentrating in one the state could capture or the state could raze. This is the framework's reformist conclusion applied precisely to religion, and it is the conclusion the whole project keeps reaching by every road: the seam cannot be abolished, so the honest work is not to empty it — which only clears the ground for a worse occupant — but to *crowd* it, to keep it plural and open and owned by no single hand, and to widen the field so that a person has more he may believe and choose among, not less. Offer the second church, the free press, the open school, the road out, the guaranteed liberty of conscience — add doors. Never burn the cheder, never dynamite the cathedral, never carve the atheist creed on the gate of the grave.

Now the strongest counter must be met, because intellectual honesty requires ending on the best case against the argument, fairly stated, and there is a serious one. It runs like this. *You say the war on religion always failed. But look at the long run. France, which ran the first assault, is today a largely secular country. Albania, which ran the most total one, is among the least religiously observant nations on earth. The Czech lands, the former East Germany, much of the post-communist world — these are among the most secular places that have ever existed. So perhaps the war did not fail; perhaps it merely worked slowly, and the revival you point to was a spasm on the way to a secularity that has, in fact, largely arrived.* This objection has real force and the paper does not gain by dodging it. But it is answered, and answering it refines the thesis rather than overturning it, by drawing the distinction the whole genealogy has turned on: the difference between the faith *withering* and the faith being *smashed*.

Secularisation, where it has durably happened, came overwhelmingly by the withering route, not the assault route — and the two must not be confused, because the method blesses the first and condemns the second. Populations grow less religious as they grow more educated, more secure,

more prosperous, more able to control the risks that once drove them to the sacred, more exposed to a widened horizon of other lives and other ways; this is the slow re-setting of the benefit dial by the changing of a whole world, and it is exactly the mechanism Marx's withering wing pointed to and the framework endorses. France is largely secular today not because of 1793 — 1793 produced the Vendée and the Concordat and left France Catholic for a century — but because of the long modernisation that followed, and the patient, field-widening settlement of 1905, and the education and prosperity of the twentieth century. Where the assault and the withering ran together, as in the communist states, it is the withering that did the lasting work: East Germany and the Czech lands were secularising with modernity as much of Europe was, and the coercion, if anything, retarded it by making faith a form of dignified resistance; the places that stayed most stubbornly religious under communism, like Poland, were often those where the assault was fiercest and the Church became the nation's shield. The assault, considered on its own, everywhere failed — it produced backlash, martyrs, and revival — and where secularity nonetheless arrived, it arrived by the other road, often *despite* the assault and never *because* of it.

And there is a second answer, which cuts deeper and returns the paper to its centre. Even grant the fullest secularisation; even grant that a population genuinely stops believing in the old God. It does not thereby become a population free of managed belief, because the machinery does not vanish — it redirects. The secular do not escape the exploit; they fasten it onto new sacred objects. The reverence that once flowed to the church flows now to the nation, to the market, to the party, to the movement, to progress, to the self, to whatever the age offers as the thing beyond question — and the same dynamics reassemble around the new object: the marked authorities to defer to, the in-group to belong to, the heresies that may not be spoken, the sacred history and the promised end. So the honest conclusion is precise and it is

the one the framework demands. The field *can* be widened out of a given faith — a person can be shown a wider world and come, by his own weighing, to hold something other than the creed he was born to, and that widening is real and is good and is the only honest power anyone has over another's mind. But the mind cannot be *emptied* of managed belief, because managed belief is what the mind does at scale; and the *assault*, specifically — the burning of the church to free the man beneath — cannot accomplish even the first thing, the widening, because it does not add a door, it demolishes the house, and leaves the man not freer but bereaved, and reaching, the moment he can, for something sacred to put back. There was no man underneath the formation, *The Man Underneath* concluded, only the man on top of it, who is the only man there is. And there is no clearing underneath the altar. There is only the altar, and the reverence it carried, which does not evaporate when the altar is broken but goes looking for a new one — and does not have to look far, because the man who broke the old altar is always standing right there, holding a new one, and calling it freedom.

CODA

The Argument Without the Sword

> *That the imposture theory has one modern form that keeps to the honest method — the argument, not the sword — in the "New Atheism" of the early twenty-first century, which set out to dispel religion by persuasion and mockery rather than by force; and that its record is the quiet confirmation of everything above, because where the state assault produced martyrs and revival, the argument produced a genuine but limited widening of the field, a real rise in unbelief driven far more by education and security than by any book, and no emptying of the seam at all — since the movement grew, in its turn, its own marked authorities and its own sacred combatants and its own schisms, and was followed within a decade by a much-discussed return of belief among the very intellectuals it had seemed to rout; so that even the war fought entirely with words could widen what people saw and could never abolish the machinery that makes them believe*

There is a modern coda to this history, and it is instructive precisely because it fought the war with the one weapon the method permits — the argument, not the sword — and so shows what the honest version of the imposture theory can and cannot do. In the first decade of the twenty-first century a cluster of writers mounted the most prominent assault on religion the Western world had seen in generations: Sam Harris's *The End of Faith* in 2004 and *Letter to a Christian Nation* in 2006, Richard Dawkins's *The God Delusion* in 2006, Daniel Dennett's *Breaking the Spell* in the same year, and Christopher Hitchens's *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* in 2007 — the four authors soon

dubbed the "Four Horsemen," who met for a filmed conversation under that name in 2007. Their thesis was the old imposture theory in a new key: religion is a delusion, Dawkins wrote, "a fixed false belief," a divisive force, a label for in-group enmity; faith is belief without evidence; the whole edifice a mistake that reason, pressed hard enough, could dissolve. And crucially, their method was persuasion and ridicule, not coercion — books and debates and lectures, the mockery of the sacred that the Jacobins had also loved but wielded now with argument in place of the guillotine.

This is the imposture theory shorn of the state, and its record is the quiet confirmation of the whole paper. On the one hand it did real work of exactly the kind the method blesses: it widened the field. It made doubt speakable, gave people who harboured private unbelief the sense that they were not alone and not deranged, put the arguments where a person could find them and weigh them for himself — and in the years that followed, unbelief in the United States rose faster than in any comparable period. But the honest analysts of that rise, including the political scientists who have tracked it most carefully, attribute it far more to the deep drivers the withering thesis names — rising security and education, the changing role of women and the shape of families, the recoil from religion's entanglement with reactionary politics — than to any book; the New Atheists rode a wave of modernisation more than they made one, and the widening they achieved was the field-widening of persuasion, which adds a door and leaves the choosing to the person, not the field-clearing of force.

And on the other hand — this is the part that matters for the thesis — the argument, for all its reach, emptied no seam at all. Belief did not vanish; it migrated and, in places, returned. The movement grew, in its own turn, the very structures it mocked in religion: its marked authorities and celebrity champions, its in-group and its heresy-hunts, its schisms and its excommunications, the whole apparatus of a sacred community assembling

around a creed of no-creed. And within a decade the culture had turned again, so that by the 2020s the conversation had shifted to a much-discussed "rebirth of belief," with prominent secular intellectuals — including one of the figures once counted among the Horsemen's allies — publicly moving toward faith, and the confident secularism of 2007 looking, in retrospect, less like the end of religion than like one more swing of a pendulum that has been swinging since Voltaire. The war fought entirely with words did what the war fought with the sword could never do — it widened the field honestly, by argument, and harmed no one — and it still could not do the thing the imposture theory has always promised and never delivered: it could not abolish the machinery that makes a person believe. It could only change, for some, and for a while, what they believed in. Which is, in the end, the whole of what anyone can honestly do to another's mind — and the exact measure of how far short that falls of the dream of emptying the altar for good.

The altar cannot be emptied. It can be moved, crowded, contested, opened to rivals, made cheap or made dear, turned toward the many's interest or against it — all the real work, and it is enormous, of building a better order rather than a worse one. But it cannot be emptied, because the reverence it holds is not in the stone but in the people who kneel there, and they will carry it out with them and set it up again somewhere the moment the old one falls, with the old God or a new, a Supreme Being burning the effigy of Atheism, a mummy in a marble tomb, a portrait where the icon hung. The men who tried hardest to prove otherwise left the proof of it in their own works: the cathedral rebuilt on the ground of the pool, the pagoda committee re-forming in the ash of Year Zero, the Godless state kneeling in 1943 to the Patriarch it had tried for twenty years to abolish. As there was no man underneath the formation, there is no clearing underneath the altar — not because any creed written on it is true, which this paper has never claimed and cannot judge, but because the altar is what

a mind that cannot verify its world builds to stand at the edge of what it cannot know, and that mind is the only mind we have. It is held, like everything in this work, as tested, not revealed.

Thematic Bibliography

The framework and its foundations. The argument stands on the project's own papers: *The Machine That Runs Itself* (the floor of force, the robe, the two dials, the seam, the gradient from the cheap self-running order to the one held down by force and surveillance, and the reformist conclusion to crowd the seam rather than empty it); *Position Logic* (reading a decision from position, value, and the field of the visible; the sincere, the cynical, and the blinkered; the students who carried a doctrine home from Paris); *The Exploit* (the mismatch between the ancient mind and the modern scale, and the permanent vulnerability to elite capture through deference, belonging, sacred value, and narrative); *The Division of Knowing* (the permanence of the seam, the seal on the channel, the routinisation of charisma, the elimination of rivals); *The Paris Apparatus* and *The Error They Carried Home* (the French Communist conduit, the cultural-revolutionary inheritance and its anti-religious licence, and Marxism as the doctrine that unmasks its own priests); and above all *The Man Underneath* (that there is no true self beneath a person's formation, so that the vanguard which razes a people's institutions to free the worker beneath frees no one but bereaves a man and captures his seam).

The Enlightenment genealogy. Voltaire's *écrasez l'infâme* and his correspondence with Frederick the Great, in which religion is called a thing "made only to deceive" yet is to be kept for the rabble, are drawn from his letters and from the standard biographical record (Durant's account among them); the line "if God did not exist, it would be necessary to invent him" is Voltaire's own. Jean Meslier's posthumous *Testament* and the Diderot couplet on the last king and the last priest are given with their attribution corrected, the sentiment Meslier's and the famous wording Diderot's. The

Treatise of the Three Impostors, d'Holbach's *System of Nature* (1770), and Condorcet's *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind* (1795) are cited from the standard history of the radical Enlightenment.

The Marxist fork. Marx's fuller passage — "the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world... the opium of the people," and the struggle against religion as "indirectly the struggle against that world" — is quoted from the introduction to *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* (written 1843, published 1844). Lenin's "opium for the people... a sort of spiritual booze" is from *Socialism and Religion* (1905), with *On the Significance of Militant Materialism* (1922) for the harder later line.

France. The dechristianisation, the Republican Calendar, Fouché's cemetery inscription, the Fête de la Raison at Notre-Dame (10 November 1793) with Chaumette's address, and the Cult of Reason are drawn from the standard scholarship on revolutionary religion (Aulard and Ozouf among the classic sources). Robespierre's "atheism is aristocratic" and the decree of 18 Floréal Year II establishing the Cult of the Supreme Being, with the festival of 20 Prairial, are quoted from the period record. The Vendée toll is given in the contested range the historiography supports; the Concordat of 1801 and Napoleon's suppression of both cults close the account.

Russia and the Soviet cult. The League of the Militant Godless and Yaroslavsky, the 1929 Law on Religious Associations, the "godless five-year plan," the church-closure and clergy-death figures (given in their contested ranges), the suppressed 1937 census with its majority of believers, and the 1943 rapprochement with Sergius are drawn from the standard histories of Soviet religion (Miner's *Stalin's Holy War* among them) and the encyclopaedic record. The Cathedral of Christ the Saviour — its 1931 demolition, the unbuilt Palace of the Soviets, the Moskva Pool, and the reconstruction

consecrated in 2000 — is from the documented record. The relic, the atheist's corner from *The ABC of Communism*, the saints and calendar and catechism and show trial are read structurally against the religion they replaced.

The comparative cases. Mexico's Calles Law and the Cristero War (with the ~90,000 figure and the higher estimates, and the *arreglos* of 1929); Spain's Red Terror and Montero Moreno's count of 6,832 clergy killed; Hoxha's Albania, the 1967 campaign, and Article 37 of the 1976 constitution; the Mongolian repressions of 1937–39 under Choibalsan; the Khmer Rouge war on Buddhism and Yun Yat's declaration; and China's "destroy the Four Olds" and subsequent revival are all drawn from the standard national and encyclopaedic sources.

The softer path and the coda. The French law of 9 December 1905 (Articles 1 and 2) and the principle of *laïcité*, the American First Amendment, and the 1795 separation decree that reopened churches are quoted from the legal record. The New Atheism — Harris (2004, 2006), Dawkins (2006), Dennett (2006), Hitchens (2007), and the "Four Horsemen" — and the analysis of secularisation's deeper drivers (Inglehart's account of the post-2007 decline of American religiosity) are drawn from the standard record, as is the subsequent "rebirth of belief" discussion.

Period and public-domain sources are quoted exactly; modern translations of mid-twentieth-century statements are quoted only briefly; modern scholarship is paraphrased and credited. Every load-bearing figure is given with the range the record supports. The framework is held, as the whole project holds it, as tested, not revealed.